THE PRODIGAL SONS
LUKE 15:11-32
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I was reading Trends magazine this week, an issue devoted to Church renewal, and came across an article that was devastatinly critical of preaching. The author, Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, estimates that in her life time she has heard no fewer than 3,896 sermons and she observes: "The monotony of the themes is deadening. Every year the same subjects, the same Church-year emphases. Every year another sermon on the prodigal son, and another on the scribes and pharisees. Jesus, I agree, had a lot of good things to say; but I doubt if even he would enjoy hearing one of his own parables rehashed every year for forty years." (Trends, March'April 1974, P.10)

Well, here comes the 1974 version: a sermon that will deal with both the prodigal and the scribes and pharisees. Ms. Wahlberg had a point, but in all fairness let it be noted that this will be the third sermon on this text since 1966. I got a little defensive when I read the article and checked my file to see when last I had used the text.

And yet, perhaps it is not an altogether nonotonous exercise to think about this story once a year. It seems to me that it is terribly important for what it says about God and man and religion. My problem has never been what to say about the Prodigal Son,but rather isolating and focusing because of the complexity of the story, and its richness and suggestiveness for our practice of Christian Faith.

As Literature, the parable contains three stories, each of which can stand by itself, but each of which intersects the other two. In that sense, it is a masterpiece of poetic genius. William Barclay calls it the "greatest short story ever told." Depending on where you begin the point of the parable can lie in the story of the loving father: or in his relationship with either of his sons. The point may be found in the relative behavior and attitudes of the two sons: or it might be in their relationship as brothers My bias, at least in the 1974 version, is expressed in the title, "The Prodigal Sons" which, by the way, is intentionally plural and not a typo-

graphical error.

In any case, let's look briefly at the three stories. The first has to do with the younger son of a wealthy father who asked for his share of his father's estate. The law dictated that if a man had two sons the older received two thirds of the estate when the father died, the younger, one third. It was not uncommon for a man to divide his property between his heirs before he died. A rather sensible idea, I think, in liew of the nearly inevitable conflict and disruption that results when the pie gets divided in our day. The son received his one third - cattle, property, jewels, loans outstanding, cashed it all in and in a matter of days left for a far country. We don't know where he went, but in every way it was a long way from home. Rather quickly he ran through his windfall, and when a famine hit, he began to hurt. In desparation he sold himself into servitude and was given the job of feeding a rich man's swine - "a task the utter shame of which only a Jew could feel" (G.A.Buttrick, Parables , P.191) The degradation of feeding pigs for a Jew can only be compared to you and I rumaging through our neighbor's garbage can for food.

"He came to himself" the story goes on. He planned an elaborate confession and decided to return home as one of his father's hired servants. But as he approached his father saw him coming, ran to meet him, kissed and embraced him. Instead of saying "I told you so" - a banquet of reunion was ordered, and the prodigal son was given a robe, ring and shoes - honor - authority and sonship.

The second theme has to do with the loving father, and if there is a single theme to the parable this is it. His love for his son included extending freedom and trust even when there was little apparent reason to do so. His love for his was unaltered by the son's prodigality. When he saw his son coming down the road he took the initiative. The sequence in the story is all-important. Before the son had an opportuntiy to recite his well-rehearsed confession the father reached out and embraced him. "Reconciliation preceeds

repentance" is the message here. You don't win a father's forgiveness by saying "I'm sorry". YOu say I'm sorry because you suddenly realize that he has already forgiven you.

During the final days of the Civil War Abraham Lincoln found himself surrounded by people who could not wait for the surrender in order to punish the Confederate States and execute the Confederate leaders. When they asked him one day what he planned to do he said simply, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." And on the day of surrender, when people gathered in patriotic ecstay, Lincoln ordered the band to play "Dixie."

The theological word for it is "Grace". The practical definition is "love with no strings attached." And the Gospel of Jesus Christ is precisely that God loves us - just as that father loved his son. To paraphrase the Psalmist, God does not keep a score card of our sins. Rather, when we become our true selves - when we realize that we are truly and fully human only in relationship with him, when we return - the slate is wiped.clean. We are loved and accepted and forgiven. That is the Gospel. And that is why you are likely to hear sermons based on this parable with regularity.

It would have been nice if Jesus had stopped at this point -with the unaltered love and grace of the father. But he didn't. And I've always been particularly intrigued with the third theme - the story of the Elder Brother - the one who comes out looking just as prodigal as the other. Only when the story ends - he's still outside sulking.

When he saw what was happening as a result of his younger brother's return he resented it. In fact, he felt pretty good about his brother leaving in the first place. Compared with that demonstration of immaturity and irresponsibility he looked pretty good to himself - his father - and to anyone who knew what was going on. And I can imagine him falling asleep every night with the smug smile of self-righteousness on his face. And so when his brother returned, and instead of getting what he deserved, was suddenly the guest of honor at a part the o[illegible]-er brother whined: "What about me?" He's

the one who brings up sex, by the way. "That son of yours has wasted your money on harlots - while I've been working in the fields. It isn't fair." And because of that -his self-righteousness - his arrogance - he becomes the prodigal. He is the one in a far country - miles away from the love of his father. It's a self-imposed prodigality. The father loves him too - but he decides to stay away.

That, I would submit, was loaded when Jesus told it: and still is, if we have the courage to think about it for a while. Jesus had a lot of trouble with people who looked, acted and sounded like the elder brother. In fact, they - Scribes and Pharisees - were the ones who successfully conspired to have him crucified. He still has trouble with people who look act, and sound like the Elder Brother: no longer Scribes and Pharisees but Presbyterians Epicopalians, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists.

But first you have to udnerstand what prompted him to tell this story. At the beginning of the 15th chapter of Luke great crowds of people were following Jesus, and when "tax collectors and sinners" were seen to be prominently among his associates, the Scribes and Pharisees began to whine: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The parable of the Prodigal Son is actually the last of three stories told by Jesus in response to the self-righteousness whining of the Scribes and Pharisees.

They were understandably upset by what they were seeing - and we needn't be too harsh on them. They, after all, were the righteous ones. Everyone knew that. They were in the business of religion. They had made a profession of it. They obeyed the Mosiac law to the letter - and when they weren't fasting and praying they were forming committees to talk about fasting and praying. They were learned men, respected men. They gave one tenth of all they had to the poor. In the chaos and discouragement of the first century they kept alive the tradition and dignity and hope of the nation.

And here comes Jesus - inferring at least that he was the Messiah of Israel - and instead of spending his time with them - instead of patting them

on the back for their conspicuous virtues - he notoriously showed up in the company of sinners. No wonder they were upset.

"Sinners", here is a broad term that might be translated "trash". Poor people, traitors, prostitutes, thieves, fishermen: people who had no time for or interest in the formalities of institutional religion; Jews only because they lived on the land: People who had forgotten their heritage and completely disregarded the religioys law, not to mention propriety and social prudence. Before we deal too harshly with the Scribes and Pharisees we need to superimpose that data on our situation and see how it feels.

In the context of the New Testament, then, we see this parable as a heightening of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities. They couldn't have helped but get the point. They were the Elder Brother - and when they heard it they were quite understandably enfuriated.

George Buttrick comments: "Jesus was compelled to relate the aftermath of the Prodigal's return so that Pharisees of that and every age might have a mirror whereby to see themselves and God." (P.195)

For, you see, religion - down through the centures right up to the present has had a way of becoming Pharisaical. Regardless of where it begins, it always seems to end up providing a device by which men can feel good about themselves at the expense of other men. Even though it begins on the basis of unity and love and common humanity, somehow it ends up becoming a wall of arrogant piety that separates men from each other.

Psychologically, we can understand how it happens. Paul Tournier, Swiss Theologian and Psychiatrist, observes that from infancy on "all trauma is connected with this doubt about being loved...The child has the impression that his parent's love is conditioned: that they will love him on on the condition that he is good." (Guilt and Grace P.189)

Tournier suggests that this is a universal human condition and proposes that men have always projected this basic anxiety into their religion. "They picture God as one who loves them only on the condition that they are good.. (P.190)

It is, of course, a very small step from that - from the assumption that God loves us if we are good - to the conclusion that it is the function of religion to be thinking about and defining, as precisely possible, those good things to do which will cause God to love us.

That was the game played by the Pharisees and Saducees. They had it backwards. Instead of obeying the religious law, fasting and praying in response to a God who loved them- they were doing all those things in order to cause God to love them.

It is the same game that was played out dramatically at the time of the reformation. The Church, it was assumed, knew what a man had to do to please God. And once that assumption is made all sorts of things are possible. You can get people to do whatever you want them to do if they believe that you alone know what it takes to please God.

And today, it is a game played with dogmatic vigor. "Say it this way: have this particular experience: believe these doctrines: do that - don't do this - and you'll be saved. God will love you." Tournier calls it the "wilderness of multiplied guilt."

Once you have been convinced that you know all the right things to do to please God, two things happen. First, you spend your life worrying whether you're doing enough: and second, you look down your nose at those poor sinners who don't agree with you and who cannot be loved by God as much as you are.

A modern missionary has written that: "What goes by the name of Christianity in much of the world, is to a great extent unbridled self-assertion in religious disguise."

And the late Reinhold Niebuhr, for a generation the leading American theologian put it eloquently:"Moral pride makes virtue the very vehicle of sin; a fact which explains why the New Testament is so critical of the righteous in comparison with publicans and sinners....For this reason religion is not simply, as is generally supposed, an inherently virtuous

human quest for God It 's merely a final battleground....In that battle even the most pious practices may become instruments of pride."

The Church of Jesus Christ must constantly be alert to the fact that religion has within it the seeds of Pharisaism. Most of us can't really identify with the younger son in the parable. He's refreshing, to be sure. Butrrick suggests that if you had to choose one of them as a companion on a week-end camping trip most of us would pick him over his older brother. But we're not ordinarily prodigal in the way he was. We're not flagrant abusers of the common morality.

But we have been known to look down our noses at those who violate our ethical norms. "Why those people are all that way: put them on welfare and the first thing they do is buy a colored T.V. and go out and get drunk." We have been known to look suspiciously at the unemployed - the migrant worker - the slum-dweller - the wino - the junkie - and to feel good that we aren't like that. We know a little bit about how the Elder Brother felt - because we've felt that way too.

There is, it seems, an inherent human incapacity to live with the idea of grace. Perhaps it's because we have so rarely seen it in ourselves. We would prefer to earn our way - in our relationships with others - in life - and with God. We would prefer a neatly structured system in which people are loved by God for being good, and hated by God for not being good: a system based on our theology - our morality - our way of life. And the very discomforting thing about this parable is that the Elder Brother couldn't cut through that system long enough to udnerstand the depths of his father's love for him. His father said: "Son, you are always with me. And all that I have is yours." But he didn't even hear it.

God loves us. He comes down the road to meet us before we have a chance to say "I'm sorry. He comes out into the field - to meet us in the midst of our resentment and says "I love you."

Jesus Christ was crucified because that idea was so radical - so offen-

sive. His death is the symbol of the depth of God's love - for he loved and forgave even those who were crucifying him.

It is still a radical idea. It is still news. God has given us what some men spend a life time trying to earn. God loves us. AMEN

Sometimes, our father, it offends our sense of propriety that you should love all of us. Help us to lay aside all the devices we use to make ourselves acceptable - and to know that we are loved. Grant us that same grace to love: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN